

SANDRA ROMERO

Reports

to the 22nd District

NOVEMBER 2001



Dear Neighbor,

It's an honor and privilege to serve as your representative to the Legislature, and I hope this newsletter finds you well.

There's nothing more important to me than hearing directly from citizens, to listen to your ideas and concerns – and to keep you informed about major issues before the Legislature.

The issue I'd like to tell you about today is the initiative and referendum process.

In 1912, Washington became one of the first states to give people the ability to pass initiatives. It's been a great experiment in direct democracy, and a powerful tool for the people.

It has also been controversial. Some citizens and lawmakers want to make changes to the process. This past session, there were 22 bills in the State Government Committee that sought to change the initiative process.

Since initiatives are such an important tool for the people, I believe it's important to have a full discussion about these ideas and hear what citizens think before any changes pass into law.

So this newsletter is a short primer on initiatives: their history, how they work and what reforms people are talking about.

I hope you find it helpful – and interesting. And as always, I welcome questions and comments on any topic.

Sincerely,

Rep. Sandra Romero

Co-chair, State Government Committee
Member, Transportation Committee

415 Legislative Building
PO Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

OFFICE: 360-786-7940
HOTLINE: 1-800-562-6000
HEARING-IMPAIRED: 1-800-635-9993

E-MAIL: romero_sa@leg.wa.gov
WEB: www.leg.wa.gov/house/

A BRIEF HISTORY

“The first power reserved by the people is the initiative.”
— Article II, Section 1(a) of the Washington state constitution, amended in 1912.

With those simple and powerful words, our state became one of the first to give its citizens the power of initiatives.

That constitutional amendment gave farmers and factory workers the ability to make law, and the power to unmake law. To play governor and over-rule the decisions of the Legislature.

HOW INITIATIVES WORK

Any citizen can file an initiative.

The fee at the Secretary of State's office is only \$5, making initiatives one of the cheapest political statements you can make. If it's a serious idea, an initiative can get the attention of lawmakers and maybe the front page of the paper.

The hard part, however, is getting signatures so an initiative gets on the ballot. Right now, it takes 197,734 votes (the formula: 8 percent of the votes cast in the last race for governor).

The Secretary of State's office spot-checks to make sure signatures are valid – registered voters in Washington state.

Once the Secretary of State certifies an initiative as having enough valid signatures, it goes on the November ballot.

The people behind the initiative write a “pro” statement in the state voter's pamphlet.

Opponents get the chance to write a “con” statement.

And then citizens mark their ballots and decide.



INITIATIVE VS. REFERENDUM

People often confuse an initiative with a referendum. There's actually four different species involved:

- **Initiative to the People**
Citizens bypassing the Legislature and putting an issue straight to the voters. A two-thirds vote of the Legislature is required to change an initiative in the first two years.
- **Initiative to the Legislature**
Citizens forcing the Legislature to either decide an issue or pass it to the voters. The Legislature can either pass as is, not act or send its own version to the voters.
- **Referendum to the People**
The Legislature putting a question to the voters.
- **Referendum to the Legislature**
Citizens forcing a public vote on a law passed by the Legislature. Less than half as many signatures are required (right now, about 100,000; the formula is 4 percent of the votes cast in the last race for governor) than for an Initiative to the People.

REPRESENTATIVE SANDRA ROMERO

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IDEAS FOR CHANGES

Initiatives are a powerful tool for the people, so it’s important to make sure that tool is sharp and in working order.

Should we pass reforms or improvements?

As you can tell from this list, some of these ideas contradict each other. That’s because citizens and lawmakers from around the state are interested in the issue and making suggestions to tailor the process to their needs. This past session, the State Government Committee considered 22 bills on this topic.

Bills before the Legislature include:

- 1. Giving citizens better information
 - a) Conducting public hearings around the state.
 - b) Including a price tag – how much an initiative will cost (or save) the state.
 - c) Forming an independent commission of citizens to study each initiative and report back to the voters,
 - d) Sending all initiatives to the Legislature first.
 - e) Giving citizens clear information about who’s bankrolling the “pro” and “con” sides of an initiative.
- 2. Improving initiatives themselves
 - a) Mandating help with the wording of initiatives to make sure everything’s legal and proper.
 - b) Requiring initiatives that spend money specify where that money would come from.
 - c) Tightening restrictions on what topics initiatives can cover.
 - d) Loosening restrictions on topics.
- 3. Reforming how initiatives get on the ballot and pass
 - a) Restricting the number of signatures that can come from a single region or congressional district in the state.
 - b) Changing how signatures are gathered.
 - c) Requiring a super-majority to pass if the initiative spends money or raises/lowers taxes.
 - d) Decreasing the signatures needed to get on the ballot.
 - e) Giving people more time to gather signatures.

BY THE NUMBERS

Up to the year 2000, citizens filed a total of 746 initiatives.

- 113 got enough signatures to be on the ballot.
- Voters rejected 59.
- 54 passed into law.
- There’ve been only 47 certified referendums from the Legislature to the people; 38 passed and nine failed.
- Citizens sent 32 referendums to the Legislature; four passed and 28 failed.



SOME PAST INITIATIVE IDEAS:

- I-187 — Permitting a modified coloring of oleomargarine.
- I-288 — Outlawing divorce for couples with children.
- I-317 — Prohibiting evidence of speeding collected by radar guns, electronic devices or unmarked cars.
- I-362 — Banning the possession, construction, transportation or sale of nuclear weapons.
- I-389 — Making it a crime to drive between the hours of one and two o’clock Sunday afternoons.
- I-461 — Requiring businesses to pay bills using gold coins.
- I-462 — Asking Congress to sell lottery tickets for rides on the space shuttle.
- I-521 — Banning lawyers from serving as state representatives or senators.
- I-615 — Requiring lobbyists to buy licenses for \$1 million.
- I-726 — Making a list of all vehicles with “irritating daytime running lights” and placing a fee on vehicles with those lights.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

History and facts about initiatives from the Secretary of State’s office — www.secstate.wa.gov/herits/

REPRESENTATIVE
SANDRA ROMERO
415 Legislative Bldg.
PO Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

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Department of Printing